



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Identifying Barriers to Human Immunodeficiency Virus Testing for Men Who Have Sex with Men in South Korea

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**Abstract**

**Objectives:** The principal objective of this study was to identify the barriers to testing for men who have sex with men (MSM) in Korea, something that might prove useful in future studies of this nature.

**Methods:** This study was conducted at gay bars nationwide in Korea. After considering several offline locations (gay bars) where MSM candidates are commonly located, random recruitment was performed using time–location sampling. A total of 944 individuals participated in this survey. A total sample of 921 cases (23 cases were excluded) was used for analysis. A self-administered questionnaire measuring the individuals' demographics, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/AIDS knowledge, stigma, phobia, optimism bias, self-efficacy for condom use, and sexual practices was used.

**Results:** About 61.8% ( $N = 569$ ) of respondents reported having been tested at least once in their lifetime, and 38.9% ( $N = 358$ ) acknowledged being tested within the past 12 months. After adjusting for age, education, and number of partners in a logistic regression analysis, awareness of testing place [odds ratio (OR) = 4.04], exposure to HIV prevention campaign (1.54), fear (OR = 1.13), and discrimination toward people with HIV/AIDS (OR = 0.94) were the main factors associated with HIV testing.

**Conclusion:** To accomplish widespread HIV testing for Korean MSM, the accessibility of testing centers and advertisement of voluntary counseling and testing to MSM are needed.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was first discovered nearly 30 years ago, 2,500,000 new cases have been discovered as of 2011, and 3,420,000 people worldwide are reported to be living with the disease. In 2010, a total of 1,800,000 people died from AIDS-related illnesses, and from the time HIV/AIDS was first discovered until now, the total estimated death toll is approximately 3,000,000 people. Consequently, HIV/AIDS has become an even more significant international health issue, even more so than more common diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria. Nonetheless, within the past 10 years, HIV transmission rates have appeared to be on the decline, positive evidence of worldwide efforts aimed at global prevention and cure. By contrast, the prevalence of HIV among the men who have sex with men (MSM) population continues to increase, particularly in certain parts of Asia [1–3]. This includes the Republic of Korea and is partly attributable to the number of HIV transmissions among MSM, which has increased from just two cases in 1985 to >1000 new cases (1114) per year in 2013 [4]. In Korea, transmission is believed to be most likely due to direct sexual contact rather than other causes such as intravenous drug use or mother-to-child transmission, both of which are commonly observed in other countries. Contrary to popular belief, the heterosexual community in Korea is in no way exempt from risk of transmission. In fact, although a certain level of incidence is seen in both homosexual and heterosexual communities, social discrimination greatly contributes to the low level of cases observed in the homosexual community because of underreporting. Excluding foreign individuals, incidence rates for Korean men were shown to be 11.6 times higher than that of Korean women. Moreover, although the highest infection rates were once found among individuals in their 30s, they are now more frequently seen among individuals in their 20s [4].

Throughout Asia, the topic of sexual behavior among MSM has become one of significant interest and concern to society, owing mainly to an increased recognition of the increased risk of HIV infection among MSM [3]. However, although many studies among the general population have been conducted and published, information about MSM in South Korea is largely unknown. Discussion of the topics of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS is considered uncomfortable. As a result, research on HIV/AIDS and MSM is at a relatively underdeveloped state in Korea. In 2011, out of 552 new cases of HIV infection, HIV infection caused by homosexual sexual encounters accounted for 42% of all cases whereas heterosexual sex accounted for 58% [5]. These figures, however, are based on infected individuals' self-reported sexual orientation whether homosexual or heterosexual. Owing to the social stigma surrounding

homosexuality, there is a much greater likelihood that individuals will conceal their homosexuality. MSM are now regarded as one of the main target groups for HIV prevention programs. For individuals vulnerable to the virus, such as those within the MSM community, implementation and promotion of HIV testing has become increasingly important. HIV testing directed toward key populations at higher risk such as MSM may assist individuals with maintenance and monitoring of their serostatus and lead to earlier treatment and prevention of further transmission to others [3]. However, there is currently little information available with regard to HIV testing among the MSM population in South Korea. This may be attributable, at least in part, to difficulties in identifying and contacting MSM. Therefore, the principal objective of this study was to identify the barriers to testing for MSM in Korea, something that might prove useful in future studies of this nature. This study is one of the first major studies to identify barriers to HIV testing among the MSM population in South Korea.

There remains a question of why more research is not being conducted to combat the spread of infection and encourage better testing behavior. Furthermore, another important point regarding the scarcity of additional information on the subject, whether in academic or public arenas, is the lack of efforts being made to generate more positive feelings toward testing and homosexuality as a whole.

Following a review of 24 different research articles discussing the barriers to HIV testing in Europe, the results of meta-analysis showed that handling barriers was perceived as low risk. HIV/AIDS-related fear, fear of being outed, access to healthcare, and other factors were all commonly noted [6]. A low perceived risk of one's potential for contracting HIV was conceptualized by Neil D. Weinstein as something called optimistic bias and notion [7]. In other words, many people tend to report a much lower perceived risk. This, however, is definitely not attributable to a low perception of one's potential risk of infection. Even with knowledge of the danger of HIV/AIDS itself, if there is an optimistic bias, the associated risk is not perceived. In Korea, several research studies on HIV/AIDS as it relates to optimistic bias have been reported [8,9]. It is a fact that fears associated HIV/AIDS interfere with HIV testing. Because in the past, HIV/AIDS-related fears have contributed negatively to the likelihood of death, prejudice and discrimination are currently becoming more important contributing factors—that is to say that confirmation of a positive test result subjects individuals to discrimination from those around them. Forty-one individuals in San Francisco, CA, USA, who reported having been infected with the virus within the past year stated that, prior to contracting the virus, they themselves had never been tested, the main reason being the fear of actually finding out that they were indeed

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